



[Rosa Luxemburg, 1871-1919](#)

## Reform or Revolution?

Rosa Luxemburg's "[Reform or Revolution?](#)" is a great classic of revolutionary literature. In the first place it is a thorough polemical rejection of Eduard Bernstein's 1899 "[Evolutionary Socialism](#)", which book Luxemburg deals with comprehensively, to the point where she concludes:

*"It was enough for opportunism to speak out to prove it had nothing to say. In the history of our party that is the only importance of Bernstein's book."*

This was true. The reformists have never made any advance on Bernstein. They only keep pushing the same busted case.

"Reform or Revolution?", first published in 1900, was the beginning of an even more crucial polemic which we will now

summarise.

Lenin published “[What is to be Done?](#)” in 1902, in response to the same book of Eduard Bernstein’s, as well as to the general outbreak of “economism”, also called “opportunism”, or “reformism”, or “syndicalism”, or in South Africa, “workerism”. In this book, Lenin clarified the basis for the vanguard communist party of professional revolutionaries of the type that the SACP, for example, is.

Lenin went further than Luxemburg, so that Lenin’s “What is to be Done?” is regarded today as the defining blueprint of the communist parties as they have been for nearly a century. The communist parties make no compromise with reformism.

Although she had demolished Bernstein even before Lenin did, yet Luxemburg in 1904 sharply contradicted Lenin’s subsequent book, and was in turn corrected by Lenin’s final reply. In the course of these polemics, the modern communist parties were fully defined for the first time, and irreversibly differentiated from the reformists, and from the reformist mass organisations such as trade unions. Let us look at this in a little more detail.

The German Social Democrats were the most numerous, well-established and long-standing of the supposedly revolutionary parties before the First World War. Luxemburg, although she was originally Polish, was a senior member of that German party.

The founding Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic and

Labour Party (RSDLP) took place in Minsk in 1898. Lenin was a member, and was the editor of the party journal “*Iskra*”, which he founded in 1900.

In 1903 the Second Congress of the RSDLP took place in Brussels and London. The consequence of this Second Congress was the split between the Bolsheviks (majority) and the Mensheviks (minority), whereby the Mensheviks, though really a minority, blackmailed the majority and consequently got away with most of the spoils, including “*Iskra*”. Hence Lenin’s detailed 1904 report of this Congress is called “[One Step Forward, Two Steps Back](#)”. It is this document that prompted Rosa Luxemburg to raise objections in the form of her 1904 “[Leninism or Marxism?](#)”.

[Lenin’s reply](#) (1904) to Rosa Luxemburg was conclusive. It settled all the open questions.

In 1905 a revolution broke out in Russia, which resolved into a bourgeois-democratic advance and the establishment of the “Duma”, or parliament, in Russia. The RSDLP held its Third Congress in that year, and Lenin wrote “[Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution](#)”, a full differentiation of the revolutionaries from the reformists. The revolutionaries make class alliances (unity-in-action) for strategic goals. The reformists capitulate, collaborate and subordinate themselves to the ruling class.

In 1914, at the outbreak of war between the main Imperialist powers, it was duly found that the Social-Democrats of the

Second International, including the German Social-Democrats led by Karl Kautsky, abandoned their internationalism and sided with their separate bourgeois ruling classes – the ultimate in class collaboration. The RSDLP held out against this collapse, while Rosa Luxemburg founded the anti-war [Spartacist League](#) in Germany. In February, 1917, a second bourgeois revolution in Russia overthrew the Tsar and in October of that year the Great October (proletarian) revolution was successfully executed under Lenin's leadership.

In January 1919, Rosa Luxemburg was murdered in Berlin by the proto-fascist "Freikorps" organisation. In the same month, the anti-communist [German Workers' Party](#) (DAP) was founded by [Anton Drexler](#). Adolf Hitler joined it in September of that year. In the following year of 1920 the DAP was re-launched as the [NSDAP](#), better known as the Nazi Party.

In the same year of 1919 the Communist International (also called Third International, or Comintern) was formed, and by 1921 the CPSA (now SACP) had been admitted to it as a recognised Communist Party.

The attached and linked download is a redacted (shortened) version of "Reform or Revolution?" prepared for discussion purposes. Two more points can usefully be picked out at this stage. The first point is the direct statement of the matter at issue in the opening lines of Luxemburg's Introduction:

*'Can the Social-Democracy be against reforms? Can we contrapose the social revolution, the transformation of the*

*existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not... It is in Eduard Bernstein's theory... that we find, for the first time, the opposition of the two factors of the labour movement. His theory tends to counsel us to renounce the social transformation, the final goal of Social-Democracy and, inversely, to make of social reforms, the means of the class struggle, its aim... But since the final goal of socialism constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the Social-Democratic movement from bourgeois democracy and from bourgeois radicalism, the only factor transforming the entire labour movement from a vain effort to repair the capitalist order into a class struggle against this order, for the suppression of this order – the question: "Reform or Revolution?" as it is posed by Bernstein, equals for the Social-Democracy the question: "To be or not to be?"*

### **Special Relevance of this book in relation to the National Democratic Revolution**

The second point comes within the text where Luxemburg describes the [Sisyphus](#)-like situation of the small enterprises under monopoly capitalism, so typical of South Africa today, as follows:

*“The struggle of the average size enterprise against big Capital... should be rather regarded as a periodic **mowing down** of the small enterprises, which rapidly grow up again, only to be mowed down once more by large industry.” [see Chapter 2, page 10 of the attached Part 1]*

Without a working-class struggle against the capitalist order, for the suppression of that order, there can only be “vain efforts to repair” it – for example, trying to make capitalist work into “decent” work.

Meanwhile the small (petty bourgeois) enterprises are periodically “**mowed down**” and hence can never come right under the monopoly power of “big Capital”. These circumstances give the two repressed classes a strong basis for unity-in-action against big Capital (e.g. in a National Democratic Revolution) both nationally, and internationally.

An alliance with anti-monopoly national capital against the monopoly bourgeoisie is a revolutionary alliance in keeping with the National Democratic Revolution. But a collaboration of all, that would include the monopolists, would be akin to fascism and would not be revolutionary, or even democratic.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Reform or Revolution, Intro, C2, C7, C9, and C10, by Rosa Luxemburg](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).